

Historic Property Evaluation Report

31-35 South Main Street, Norwalk, CT



Prepared for:
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20 December, 2022

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Introduction

The services of Jan Hird Pokorny Associates (JHPA), based in New York, NY, were obtained by F.D. Rich Company of Stamford, CT. to evaluate the context and salient conditions of the commercial building façade at 31-35 South Main St., South Norwalk, CT., and suggest possible preservation options. On 17 December, 2022, Michael Devonshire, of JHPA, Inc. performed a visual site assessment of the exterior of the building at 31-35 South Main St., Norwalk, CT. The visual inspection was the basis for the findings of this Evaluation Report.

Purpose

The purpose of the on-site evaluation was to determine what original materials/finishes remain extant on the building main facade and what later accretions have occurred that have impacted the original façade, the condition of extant architectural features, and what interventions would be necessary to maintain or restore the building to an historically appropriate level without loss of inherent historical integrity.

Methodology

The inspection and report methodology included review of pertinent documentation, a visual review of the historic district, and close on-site visual assessment of the building exterior and adjacent context.

Format

The written report and photographs are intended to complement and, where applicable, reference each other to produce a comprehensive evaluation of the building.

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Background

The building at 31-35 So. Main St. was included in the 1985 boundary increase of the South Main and Washington Streets Historic District of South Norwalk, and was included as a contributing building under Criteria A and C for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Building Description

The building at 31-35 South Main St., originally known as the Udelman Building was constructed in 1927, and is a two-story, seven bay wide structure, clad in brick with limestone trim elements. A narrow central entry bay is flanked by three wider symmetrical bays. The first floor features a recessed central opening to second floor offices flanked by commercial storefronts that feature central recessed entries with two large commercial windows on either side. A discontinuous limestone cavetto string course

surmounts the store level sign band of the commercial storefronts. The second floor features a single central punched window opening with one-over-one sash, flanked on either side by three punched openings with paired one-over-one sash. Above the window spandrels, a shallow cornice featuring an ovolo base and corona complete the formal “storefronts”. The façade is completed by a brick masonry parapet capped with a limestone coping which has been covered with sheet metal. A central stepped pediment features the name and date of the building construction in limestone.

Conditions/Observations

General

The building appears to have undergone a renovation within the last 20-25 years. The renovation (or a later intervention) included: removal of the original storefronts and replacement with new wood and glass elements that are much less articulated than the originals, replacement of the central main entry door, replacement of second floor windows. The work also has included complete painting of the building facade, which appears to have concealed a number of building deficiencies and deterioration as noted in the following conditions (Photo 1).

In order for the building to return to its original appearance, removal of the extant paint will be necessary. Paint removal will reveal a great number of deficiencies, both structural and cosmetic, that will impact the historical integrity of the building.

Brick Masonry

The original facade brick masonry is a glazed buff-colored brick, laid in common bond, with the exception of an infill spandrel arch above the second floor level central window opening that features a basket weave pattern in the brick masonry.

Paint has failed on the façade bricks at some locations. Serious displacement of the brick masonry above the second floor level window level has occurred, which appears to be a result of corrosion and oxide jacking of the steel lintels at the window heads. The masonry displacement is severe at some locations and may present a hazard to public safety (Photo 2).

It is likely that repair of the brick masonry will be problematic and not result in a successful “restoration”. Removal for salvage of the bricks above the lintel level without damage will be difficult, as they are laid in Portland cement mortar, a tenacious, rigid material that will not be able to be removed without damage to the bricks, thus a considerable amount of original masonry will be lost.

Limestone

As with the brick masonry above the second floor level window level, limestone quoins are severely displaced and will be difficult to salvage and reuse without damage – resulting in a considerable amount of replacement (Photo 3).

At the central pediment inset name and date panel limestone, there is a significant amount of stone spalling (Photo 4). The disfigured stone obscures the date of construction, and is visually obtrusive. At the parapet coping level, the copings have been covered with sheet metal that may be concealing damage, and the two stone scrolls that flank the stepped pediment have been covered with asphaltic material. At the limestone string course above the storefront sign band the original limestone cornice above the 31 Main St storefront appears to have been replaced with a ferrous replacement, which has

lost paint and is corroding. The course above the #35 storefront is delaminating and spalling at several locations. The sign band limestone at both storefronts appears to have been patched; awkwardly applied repairs are visible through the paint film. Portions of the limestone at the street level window surrounds are also damaged. At the central entry door surround, there are visible poorly applied patch repairs at the ashlar stone, and the rope detailing and base stones at the door surround are eroded, exhibiting mechanical damage. Early photographs of the façade reveal a cornice and entablature above the central door that appears much more robust and elaborate than the extant broken pediment and ovolo base element. The extant pediment shows a considerable amount of mechanical stone damage. The ashlar quoins at the two ends of the façade also exhibit considerable mechanical damage (Photo 5).

Windows

Early photographs reveal that the original windows featured one-over-one hung sash in frames that fully filled the punched openings. The extant windows are one-over-one wood sash, inappropriately smaller than the originals openings, and placed awkwardly off center within the masonry openings - with sheet metal infill panning at the perimeters (Photo 6).

Doors

The paired doors to the commercial spaces within the storefronts are new, and appear to be in serviceable condition. The single central entry door appears to be nonoriginal and is in only fair condition

Conclusion/Intervention Options

As mentioned, the building at 31-35 So. Main St. was included in the 1985 boundary increase of the South Main and Washington Streets Historic District, and was designated a contributing building under Criteria A and C for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration for reuse of the building façade to a level complying with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards will be very difficult, if not impossible.

While the building does represent a period of commercial activity in the morphology of downtown South Norwalk, it was originally exceedingly modest in design, only slightly more articulated than the building at #37 So. Main St., that was demolished for the present hotel. A comparison to the other buildings within the original and expanded district suggests that the design of the building is decidedly unremarkable.

The lack of architectural zeitgeist notwithstanding, the present condition of the building's main façade, hidden by layers of paint which conceals a plethora of building deficiencies, presents serious problems from the perspective of architectural integrity and authenticity. With an attempt to "restore" the building to its original appearance, removal of the paint (which itself was an inappropriate treatment for the building) will reveal fully the significantly damaged and deteriorated condition of the limestone trim elements, and probably previous inappropriate brick replacement as well. Spalls and exfoliation of limestone elements will be prominent and require patching, stone dutchman repairs, or full replacement. Further, the significantly displaced brick masonry and limestone elements will require reconstruction and likely replication; the inappropriate and awkward windows will require replacement with more suitable units to replicate the originals; the wooden storefronts will require replacement with period-appropriate fronts; replacement of the ferrous cornice element with limestone will be required. Removal of the sheet metal flashing at the front parapet coping may reveal further stone damage that will require replacement. Ultimately, the present near monochromatic appearance of the building is unsightly; the appropriate interventions necessary to return this building facade to its original (or even historically acceptable)

appearance will result in a building highly compromised and totally lacking in authenticity or historic architectural integrity. Very little historic material would exist.

Considering the above conditions and the loss of authenticity that would be the result of any restoration effort, including an effort to salvage the existing façade and incorporate into a new building on the site, it is recommended that the building be permitted to be demolished, and several unique elements that might be able to be salvaged without damage (ex. The central entry door surround and pediment, name and date panel) be incorporated into or displayed within any new building constructed on the site.

Appendix A: Photographs



Photo 1 Paint obscures much of the damage and deterioration on the building façade

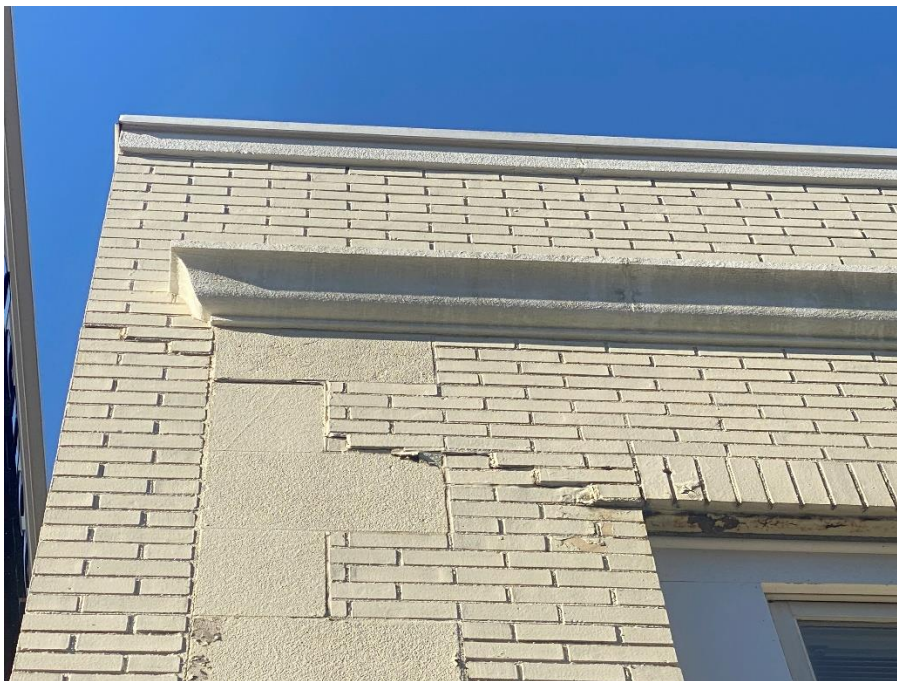


Photo 2 Oxide jacking of steel has resulted in serious damage to brick and stone masonry.



Photo 3 Stone masonry has been seriously displaced and presents a hazardous condition



Photo 4 Limestone spalling will require significant intervention affecting building integrity



Photo 5 Ashlar quoins at the building ends are damaged and unsightly



Photo 6 Windows on the building are inappropriate and will require appropriate replacement.